



**University of  
Zurich**<sup>UZH</sup>

**Zurich Open Repository and  
Archive**

University of Zurich  
University Library  
Strickhofstrasse 39  
CH-8057 Zurich  
[www.zora.uzh.ch](http://www.zora.uzh.ch)

---

Year: 2007

---

## **Doubles, others, and the split-self: a Lacanian reading of identity in Paul Auster's New York Trilogy**

Loren, Scott

**Abstract:** First published as a whole in 1987, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* has often been referred to as a postmodern work of detective fiction. Comprised of three stories highly similar in structure and theme, the narrator of *The Locked Room* informs us: "These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about" (294). The plots of the three stories are constructed around a protagonist who finds himself confronted by a certain task. Most poignant, perhaps, is that engagement in the task is coupled with a destabilization of the individual's sense of self. The more he engages this task, the more he is confounded by it and the more his surroundings take on an oddly conspiratorial appearance. We continually witness the individual in 'Lacanian moments', where he must address questions of his own subjectivity, must take on symbolic mandates, or is confronted by doubles in uncannily familiar mirror spaces, where another individual effectively equals himself, or where specters from his past come back to haunt him.

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-148363>

Conference or Workshop Item

Draft Version

Originally published at:

Loren, Scott (2007). Doubles, others, and the split-self: a Lacanian reading of identity in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*. In: Hellenic Association for American Studies - Ex-centric Narratives: Identity and Multivocality in Anglo-American Cultures - International Graduate Student Conference, Thessaloniki, March 2007.

Scott Loren

**“Doubles, Others, and the Split-Self: a Lacanian reading of identity in Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*”<sup>1</sup>**

First published as a whole in 1987, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* has often been referred to as a postmodern work of detective fiction. Comprised of three stories highly similar in structure and theme, the narrator of *The Locked Room* informs us: "These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about" (294). The plots of the three stories are constructed around a protagonist who finds himself confronted by a certain task. Most poignant, perhaps, is that engagement in the task is coupled with a destabilization of the individual's sense of self. The more he engages this task, the more he is confounded by it and the more his surroundings take on an oddly conspiratorial appearance. We continually witness the individual in 'Lacanian moments', where he must address questions of his own subjectivity, must take on symbolic mandates, or is confronted by doubles in uncannily familiar mirror spaces, where *an other* individual effectively *equals* himself, or where specters from his past come back to haunt him.

After various articles and at least one entire monograph on reading Auster's work through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Bernd Herzogenrath's *An Art of Desire*), why return to Auster's *The New York Trilogy* with Lacan? What presents itself rather readily to a Lacanian reading is, on the one hand, the focus on language *per se* in the trilogy. As Heiko Jakubzik suggests, "Auster's focus on language and his play on a coil of beings who are either in search of their creators or who have lost contact to them, are the main reasons that Auster is so often associated with Lacan. The readable symbols in *City of Glass* undoubtedly find their counterpart in Lacan's symbolic order and the postulate that all is language or symbol" (179).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there is a continual and explicit

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Hellenic Association for American Studies conference, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> "Die Thematisierung der Sprache und Austers Spielereien mit einer Spirale von Geschöpfen, die nach ihren Schöpfern suchen oder den Kontakt zu ihnen verloren haben, sind die Hauptgründe dafür, daß Auster so oft mit Lacan in Verbindung gebracht wird. Die lesbaren Symbole in der *City of Glass* haben zweifellos ihr Pendant in Lacans symbolischer Ordnung und seinem Postulat, daß alles Sprache oder Symbol sei." My translation.

focus on the nature of the spectral in relation to identity. Quoting Lacan, Paul Jahshan points out that "Lacan ends by saying that breaking out of the mirror stage 'generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego's verifications,' a process diametrically opposed to what happens to Blue" in *Ghosts* (391).<sup>3</sup> Jahshan provides a Lacanian reading of *Ghosts* focusing primarily on the attention to language in the "history and theory of writing, from its classical times to the present poststructuralist day" (392) that is allegorized in the story, and on the visual, or specular, elements within this installment of the trilogy. Like Jakubzik and Jahshan, Bernd Herzogenrath and Martin Klepper have also offered enlightening Lacanian readings of *The New York Trilogy*, giving specific attention to the aspects of identification through mirroring (Lacan's "mirror stage"), and the symbolic register as a linguistic dimension, seeming allusions to which can be found throughout these three stories.

However, despite *The New York Trilogy's* portrayal of an individual performing a balancing act between social ties and a collapse into isolation, and despite Lacan's overall concern with subjectivity in its necessarily social context, there is something Lacanian readings have surprisingly failed to do: make the connection between Lacan's register of the imaginary and the register of the symbolic specifically in their social dimensions as these might be relevant to the trilogy. Regarding the individual in its social context, what has been favored almost exclusively is the role of the double.

Though we have increasingly become accustomed to considering such fictional portrayals of the double in relation to Freud's notion of the uncanny, they also recall Lacan's concept of the "imaginary," central to his theory of subjectivity. In framing the destabilization of character identities through various doublings and phantasmatic projections, Auster establishes a conceptual basis for commentary on the split nature of the subject. Concomitantly directing the reader's focus toward questions of ontology and semiology, the book has recourse to various allegories that invoke metaphors for the representative nature of language and knowledge, such as Humpty Dumpty's commentary on the nature of words, the biblical myth of the Garden and the Fall, and Freud's Fort/Da game from "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoting Lacan's *Écrits*.

A Lacanian theory of subjectivity claims that the subject is inextricably rooted in language. Three elements central to this theory are the register of the symbolic, which we will discuss in relation to *City of Glass*, the register of the imaginary, we'll consider in *Ghosts*, and the relation between the big Other and the subject, which we'll find in *The Locked Room*. This kind of mapping (Lacan onto Auster) will provide insight into *The New York Trilogy's* commentary on subjectivity, which I would wager is what makes these three stories "the same story." Though I would also wager that following the trajectory of these three stories along this specific path will yield a clear development in their commentary on subjectivity. For if we are to consider this work a work of detective fiction, the mystery each tale seeks to uncover is the mystery of the self in its social context.

### **Language and the Symbolic in *City of Glass***

"Language is not truth, it is the way we exist in the world"

from *The Invention of Solitude*

In order to facilitate an understanding of Lacanian subjectivity, we might first consider the subject's relation to the big Other as being determined through language. This structure is briefly outlined in Lacan's lectures on the "Introduction of the big Other:"<sup>4</sup>

So there's the plane of the mirror, the symmetrical world of the *egos* and of the homogeneous others. We'll have to distinguish an other level, which we call the wall of language... [W]e in fact address A1, A2, those we do not know, true Others, true subjects. They are on the other side of the wall of language, there where in principle I never reach them. Fundamentally, it is them I am aiming at every time I utter true speech, but I always attain *a'*, *a''*, through reflection. I always aim at true subjects, and I have to be content with shadows. The subject is separated from the Others, the true ones, by the wall of language... In other words, language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him [244].

The distinction we should make here is one between *other individuals* with whom the potential subject can identify and the big Other, from which the potential subject is separated by the wall of language. The first, other individuals, are fellow beings, so to

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955.*

speak - people with whom the potential subject interacts and who, functioning as screens for a projection of the self, provide a reflection of selfhood. The Other, which has *representatives* among fellow beings and social institutions, is nevertheless not an individual, but can rather be thought of as an originary cause-factor to which the potential subject perpetually returns and which acts as a guide for subjectivity within a social context. The point here is that we interact with *other individuals* through the symbolic medium of language, whereby the big Other, when we (unconsciously) identify with its desire, functions like signposts within the medium of language and the social. We might say that the big Other exists beyond the realm of language and the social (within the unconscious), though its desire is articulated within these realms. Lacan is interested in the way an individual emerges into and engages in the social. With the concept of the big Other, we can ask the following: How can we theorize a structural model for the psychological make-up of the individual, from which perceptions, desires, actions, and so forth will proceed? Such a psychological foundation finds its originary 'raw material' in the individual's early psycho-social experiences, which, to a great extent, are bound up in systems of representation and interpretation. That is, they are bound up in language.

The first and longest installment of *The New York Trilogy* is the one most pointedly concerned with subjectivity as it relates to language. In *City of Glass*, the protagonist Daniel Quinn becomes accidentally mixed up in a case of missing persons. A stranger calls his house looking for a detective named Paul Auster. At first, Quinn is abrupt with the stranger, but later regrets this, and when the stranger calls again Quinn assumes the identity of Paul Auster, detective. Working under this assumed identity, he is hired to protect Peter Stillman junior from his father, who has recently been released from prison. When Stillman junior was but a few years old, his father locked him away in total isolation for nine years. Stillman senior, a professor of theology, believed that in the prelapsarian Garden of Eden there was a 'natural language': that is, a direct correlation between names and things. His hypothesis was that if an innocent child were to have no contact with the corrupting elements of the outer world, he would eventually begin to speak the 'true' names of things.

In order to find out more about Stillman senior, Quinn goes to the library to do some research. Having located a book Stillman once published, he comes across the following passage: "Adam's one task in the Garden had been to invent language, to give each creature and thing its name. In that state of innocence, his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life. A thing and its name were interchangeable" (43). In this regard, we might say we are talking about language becoming material, as opposed to being a tool for representation. This is a pervasive motif throughout the book of Genesis: "God said 'let there be light', and there was light."<sup>5</sup> Though, as Quinn reads on, "[a]fter the fall... Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language" (43). This difference between the idea of a material language and language as representation can be related back to Lacan's notion of the real vs. the symbolic. The real being the un-nameable, unknowable materiality of things, in Immanuel Kant's terminology, *das Ding an sich* (the thing in itself) or the *noumenon*. The symbolic, on the other hand, corresponds to Lacan's "wall of language," the location of representation in which meaning is produced. We might thus invert Stillman senior's claim by proposing that the story of the expulsion equates the rise of language as a system of representation with the rise of *knowledge*. What happens if we pursue this allegory?

In the biblical tradition, we know that it is because of knowledge gained that Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden and made mortal. We also know that, of the knowledges gained, or of the changes that resulted, one was knowledge of language as a system of representation. Thus, if we read the Fall as an allegory about language, we might propose that the knowledge gained translates into the capacity for abstract thinking. Before the expulsion, there was no difference between a thing and its name. Language was material, or, as Stillman senior notes, "[a] thing and its name were interchangeable." In this sense, 'the word' was distinct from language as we understand it: it was not an abstraction, but rather the thing itself. It is only after the fall that 'the

---

<sup>5</sup> Genesis i. 3.

word' takes on its representative capacity, that it becomes something abstract and arbitrary. There is an event in the story of the Fall that illustrates this move from *essential being* (immortality; *thing*-ness), to abstraction (mortality; representation):

The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid from him among the trees. The Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?' He replied, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.' God said, 'Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree which I forbade you to eat from?'<sup>6</sup>

We know, of course, that he has, and that it is because of this that he can have some concept of his nakedness, whereas before this newly acquired 'knowledge', he could not have. The acquisition of knowledge allows him to think in abstraction, or dialectically: the knowledge, 'I am naked' also includes the possibility of not being naked. Upon perceiving this split in man - a split by language, into binary thinking, into representation and abstraction - God recognizes that a vital change has taken place and that the irreversible has come to pass. We encounter an additional allegory for the 'split' the acquisition of language necessarily brings with it when Quinn meets Stillman senior for the first time in Riverside Park. Quite appropriately, the split is allegorized through a reference to Humpty Dumpty, who also had a great fall.

When discussing the possibility of a natural language, Stillman senior tells Quinn, "You see, the world is in fragments, sir. And my job is to put it back together again" (76). He continues, "our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words remain the same" (77). The "put it back together again," is a clear reference to Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, who surfaces a couple of pages later, when Stillman explains the significance of the initials H.D. to Quinn: "Humpty Dumpty. You know who I mean. The egg." Quinn replies, "As in 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall'?" Stillman goes on to explain that Humpty Dumpty was "a philosopher of language," and that the wall he sat on was, after a manner, Lacan's wall of language: "Humpty Dumpty: the purest embodiment of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Genesis iii, 8-11.

human condition... 'When *I* use a word, Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less. The question is, said Alice, whether you *can* make words mean so many different things. The question is, said Humpty Dumpty, which is to be master - that's all.'"<sup>7</sup> As Bernd Herzogenrath suggests in his reading of Stillman's equation of the egg with the *condition humana*: "man himself is a *split* being because of language... Thus the originary egg is *always already* broken" (61). This brings us directly back to the idea that the nature of words, of language, is representative and arbitrary, and thus flexible and unreliable. This is precisely what vexes Stillman senior. Not surprisingly, it also occupies Quinn's thoughts.

Quinn addresses the nature of the connection between things and language earlier in the story when he drives through Central Park, wondering "if these were the same trees that Peter Stillman saw when he walked out into the air and light. He wondered if Peter saw the same things he did, or whether the world was a different place for him. And if a tree was not a tree, he wondered what it really was" (36). The last sentence of this quote contains the suggestion that the things around us are different in their essence from what they are as we perceive them through language. This again is a nod in the direction of the Lacanian real and the Kantian *noumenon*: things have their *thing-ness*, an essence outside of representation, beyond the symbolic universe. There is also the suggestion that the information one person's sensory input relays to his or her mind and the way that information fits into that particular person's system of knowledge differs from the way it is processed in another person's. With this we are not far off from the conundrum of the Cartesian circle: we can only be sure of something insofar as our mind tells us 'it is true', though by the same token, our mind depends on our undependable senses for the input of 'raw material' that it uses to decide what is true.

In postmodern (or poststructural) theory, we would say that this difference in perception is based in the way we each necessarily read signs differently, that the ever-present gaps in the chain of signification produce an endless multitude of potential meanings. Thus, one person's truth differs from another's. Or to put it another way, one person's tree differs from another's. Of interest to language and subjectivity in *The New York Trilogy* is, then, not merely the idea that one exists within the realm of language as a

---

<sup>7</sup> Pp. 81. Quoting Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.



symbolic realm of representation, that one is 'split' by language (from the 'real', for example), but that each individual is situated differently within language; and, moreover, that our being situated within language hinges both on the symbolic nature of language but also on the interrelations between subjects within the symbolic as sharers in "symbolic fictions." The register of the symbolic is a matrix of language and representation, but it is also the location of the social in which symbolic fictions are negotiated. As Lacan notes: "the structures of society are symbolic" (*Écrits*, 132). A scene from *The Locked Room* can help to illustrate this point.

### **Fort/Da**

In *The Locked Room*, the narrator, an author experiencing writer's block, is contacted by the wife of an old friend who has disappeared. This friend, also a writer, had informed his wife that if anything should happen to him, she should entrust his writing to the narrator, who would know what to do. As the story progresses, the narrator replaces his friend Fanshawe, publishing his work, moving into his home, and assuming the symbolic position of husband and father. The story documents the narrator's (psychological) relationship to his old friend Fanshawe, as well as the development of his relationship to Fanshawe's wife, Sophie, and son, Ben.

At one point, the narrator recalls the moment Ben verbalizes his recognition of the narrator in the symbolic position of the father. While on a flight to New York to look for a new apartment, "Ben peed through his diapers onto my lap. When I showed him the large dark spot on my pants, he laughed, clapped his hands together, and then, looking straight into my eyes, called me Da for the first time" (241). The reference here, to show that the child recognizes him as 'father', can be read as a form of initiating interpellation, a call or 'hailing' of a potential subject into its symbolic capacity. The child recognizes the presence of the narrator in his signifying capacity as they are related to one another. This is wonderfully visualized by the pee spot: the child sees himself 'on' the narrator, so to speak. He is "*Da*" (there), as opposed to '*fort*' (elsewhere).

Lacan interprets Freud's *Fort/Da* (gone/there) game as an illustration that a child has begun to think in symbolic terms. When it understands that its mother is *fort* for the first time, it has moved from the position in which the universe is one, in which everything is

'me', to separation, to a universe of representation and language, where it can have a *concept* of its mother as she is gone. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud describes the game played by his grandson. It's worth quote at some length:

This good little boy...had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o', accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of the present account were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word '*fort*' ['gone']. I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play 'gone' with them. One day I made an observation which confirmed my view. The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it... What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful '*da*' ['there'].<sup>8</sup>

In Freud's commentary, the object stands in as a representative for the mother. The child repeatedly throws the object away in an act through which it can heighten its pleasure in anticipation of the return of the mother. Via Lacan, we can see how this 'entry into the symbolic' erects a wall of language, immediately setting in motion the entirety of a symbolic universe composed of representation and symbolic fictions (the interrelations between potential subjects). With the emergence into representation, questions as to my place in the world begin to arise: What does the presence of the Mother, or inversely her absence, represent? How shall I interpret her sudden reappearance in response to my screams? How do I differentiate between the suffering of another screaming child and my own suffering? What does the Mother/Father want from me? What do I want? Such questions may be reductive, but they can offer some insight into how basic social structures are formed in relation to representation and interpretation - in relation to language. As such, they illustrate how the individual is continually confronted with the desire of the big Other per an encounter within the socio-symbolic, necessarily requiring interpretation. Or, to put it another way, social relations and symbolic fictions are regulated through systems of representation and, necessarily, interpretation. Critical for the individual's engagement in society is its ability to interpret various codes of

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Freud Reader*, 599.

representation ('what does the Other want of me?'), allowing for the engagement in such symbolic fictions.

Returning to *The Locked Room*, we can read the "Da" as indicating that the narrator is 'there' and that he has come to fill the symbolic position of the father (*Daddy*); that a symbolic relationship (or 'fiction') has come into bloom between the child and himself. We should think of this in regard to what Dylan Evans, paraphrasing Lacan, says about entry into subjectivity and the parent/adult representing the big Other: "The moment after the subject has jubilantly assumed his image as his own, he turns his head round toward this adult, who represents the big Other, as if to call on him to ratify this image" (116). This is precisely what we witness in the recounting of the pee incident: "he laughed, clapped his hands together, and then, looking straight into my eyes, called me Da for the first time." We also witness something like this in *City of Glass*, but with a twist.

When Quinn visits the residence of the 'real' Paul Auster, he meets Auster's son, who has found a yoyo out in the street, though he doesn't know how to use it. Quinn asks the son if he can try the yoyo. When he does, he is only able to make the yoyo go down, or 'fort', but not return. Then, when Auster returns to the room, introducing Quinn to the boy, he says "Daniel, this is Daniel" (they are both named Daniel), in response to which the boy "burst out laughing and said, 'Everybody's Daniel!'" (102). Here, what we have is the inversion of what is portrayed in the pee incident and what is at stake in the Fort/Da game. Instead of the reel on the string disappearing and reappearing, acting as a trope for the symbolic fiction that separates 'me' from the rest of the world, the game does not function, leaving no distinction between me and the rest of the world ("Everybody's Daniel!"). This elegant inversion of the Fort/Da game in *City of Glass* and its reversion in *The Locked Room* act as more than a complex conceit in *The New York Trilogy*. They function metonymically for the overall states of subjectivity portrayed in each of the stories. In *The Locked Room*, the narrator ultimately moves into what we would consider proper subjectivity, identifying with the unconscious desire of the big Other and assuming a position within the socio-symbolic fictions of family and profession. Ultimately, the symbolic world 'functions' in *The Locked Room*. In *City of Glass*, on the other hand, Quinn appears to degenerate into imaginary mirror spaces, ending up, Bartleby-like, expiring alone in a small room that looks out onto an airshaft at the back of

a building. His symbolic universe disintegrates. This juxtapositioning of functional symbolic fictions and imaginary mirror spaces, or let's say *the linking* of these two, is central to the overall structure of *The New York Trilogy*. Not incidentally, in a Lacanian theory of subjectivity, the symbolic register and subjectivity itself are inextricable interconnected with the register of the imaginary.

According to Lacan, the register of the imaginary is a mirror-like realm in which fantasies of wholeness are fostered. If the symbolic is the realm of the social, then the imaginary is the realm of the ego, where the relation between the individual and others is reflexive and interchangeable. Here, an *other* is never another proper subject, but rather a phantasmatic reflection of the self, unmediated by socio-symbolic laws. We can think of the imaginary as the location of the double. From the very beginning of *The New York Trilogy*, we are made aware that we are reading stories about doppelgangers, specters, multiple identities compounded in one individual, and adherence to dyadic imaginary spaces. Within the first few pages, the narrator takes on several identities: Quinn, William Wilson, Paul Auster, Max Work. Quinn is framed as the 'actual' identity of the protagonist; William Wilson, his pen name; Paul Auster, a detective whose identity Quinn has assumed; Max Work, the protagonist of Quinn's books, who's also a detective, and beyond this there are still more mirrorings and doublings. There is also the intertextual signal toward the double in the reference to Poe's tale of haunting doppelgangers, "William Wilson." Poe's story likewise states in the beginning that William Wilson is the assumed pen-name of the narrator: "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation" (1).

As Poe's tale progresses, we witness an unfolding of the spectral nature of a character's split identity, how he is haunted by his *other* self, which is finally exposed as a mirror-like phantasm. It is worth pointing out that Poe's tale is expressly concerned with a compromise in agency regulated or imposed by the mirror self (the imaginary): "Poor indemnity for natural rights of self-agency so perniciously, so insultingly denied!" (18).

Here, we can see that Poe has 'read' both Freud and Lacan<sup>9</sup>: the tale suggests the 'oppressive' limiting capacity the super-ego imposes as a controlling factor for the individual within society; but also that a dyadic adherence to imaginary space excludes the individual from the symbolic (ultimately resulting in psychosis).

### **Doubles and the Imaginary in *Ghosts***

The imaginary "relates specifically to the dual relation between the ego and the specular image" (Evans, 82). In *Ghosts* the relation to the specular image functions as a leitmotif: "in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself" (144). Or, as Martin Klepper has suggested, "Blue's observation of Black increasingly becomes self-observation."<sup>10</sup> In this story, the protagonist Blue, is hired by White to spy on Black, only to find out that Black and White are the same person, and perhaps that even he and Black are the same person. Blue moves into a hotel room across from Black's hotel room, where one window looks directly onto the other. The double-paned lens through which Blue observes Black, and which is at times doubled yet again through the use of binoculars, frames the reflexive act of looking, often into or through glass, that is so central to *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*. Glass, either in the form of a lens, a window or a mirror, often stands in as trope for how the individual is situated within language and the social. When it comes time for Blue to write the first report of his findings on Black, we are told:

His method is to stick to outward facts, describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described, and to question the matter no further. Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there. Oh, there are moments when the glass gets a trifle smudged and Blue has to polish it in one spot or another, but once he finds the right word, everything clears up [146].

Expanding on this trope, we might propose that words function as windows when one is properly situated within the symbolic. Further, the symbolic function of words is

---

<sup>9</sup> It is, of course, the reverse that is true. Both Freud and Lacan were familiar with and drew on, Lacan in particular, the work of Poe.

<sup>10</sup> "die Beobachtung von Black wird immer mehr zur Selbstbeobachtung" (268). My translation.

reflexive of symbolic fictions within the social. When one accepts the symbolic, representative nature of words and language, they function as a medium for communication and the basis for symbolic fictions. Likewise, subjectivity functions when one accepts certain symbolic mandates that will help to determine one's position within symbolic fictions. This, as I will illustrate, is what we see at work in *The Locked Room*. Problems arise precisely when one begins to dwell, as Stillman senior does, on the expectation that words should tally "exactly with the thing described." Stillman senior's pursuit of such expectations is thus paralleled by a collapse of symbolic fictions (his professional status, his family status, his more general social status as determined through his imprisonment) and of communication (embodied in Stillman junior). Throughout *The New York Trilogy*, reflections of the self through lenses, glass, and doubles are accompanied, then, by ontological crises of language and the social. For example, Blue "is able to invent a multitude of stories to fit the facts concerning Black," but "with the future Mrs Blue all is silence" (146). In other words, while Blue finds himself increasingly within the realm of the imaginary, where Black holds the position of an imaginary *other*, the specular image reflected back at the ego, his potential socio-symbolic fictions (of family, for example) and his ability to create narratives about them diminish accordingly.

There is an additional reference to this type of self-reflection given specific attention in *Ghosts*. It functions as a *mise en abyme* in which Blue recalls a story he read in a magazine once. While skiing in the French Alps, a young man finds himself near the spot where his father disappeared some twenty-five years earlier. The young man chances upon a body in the ice, only to find, horrifically, that it is his father looking back at him, dead and preserved: "The dead man was still young, even younger than his son was now, and there was something awesome about it, Blue felt, something so odd and terrible about being older than your own father, that he actually had to fight back tears as he read the article" (151). This passage is collocated within the diegetic trajectory alongside Blue's 'epiphanies' concerning how language obscures and at the height of his identification with his mirror projection, Black.<sup>11</sup> What is it about this event that Blue is so moved by?

---

<sup>11</sup> "There are moments when he feels so completely in harmony with Black, so naturally at one with the other man, that to anticipate what black is going to do...he need merely look into himself" (156).

There is something particularly disturbing about the son being older than the father, having 'survived' him in this rather unconventional manner. As we know, the father, in his symbolic capacity, can stand in at the location of the castrative Other. We are told that when the son first looks at the face in the ice, he has the impression he is looking at himself, at a mirror. Thus, what was once the location of the Other has suddenly shifted into mirror space, and the son finds himself 'beyond the Other', in a manner. It is not that the son has assumed the position that the father held (that the son is in an *Other* position), but rather that the father has covertly stolen into the position of the son (the *other* position), leaving vacant the location of the Other. This vacancy is precisely what speaks (or more precisely, what does not speak) to Blue, who likewise finds himself isolated from his 'Others' and from the world: "he wishes to God that his father could be there...telling him stories" and "[t]hat's what happens when you have no one to talk to" (151). This brings us again to the notion of symbolic fictions, as mediated through narratives and language, being the way we exist in the world. Reduced to isolation and mirror reflections, with no one to talk to, with no narratives placing him in the position of the subject, Blue is cut off from the socio-symbolic and, like the son whose father has turned into an *other*, from any potential contact with the desire of the big Other.

### **The Subject of the Big Other in *The Locked Room***

If *Ghosts* is constructed around a primarily imaginary model, then it is in the third story, appropriately titled *The Locked Room*, that brings us closer to an idea of the Lacanian big Other and the subject's relation to it. Where the ego inheres to the realm of the imaginary, the subject belongs to the realm of the symbolic. The subject is not merely the individual with a conscious sense of agency, but rather the subject of the unconscious (in Freud, das *Es*, not das *Ich*). It is the Lacanian big Other, the originary location of language, that mediates the unconscious subject's sense of propriety within the symbolic. The big Other is radical, inaccessible alterity and thus not accessible to the subject in the way little others are, but is at the same time essential to the subject. Although the big Other is in principle an unconscious agency, not an actual person, it can have representatives within the social, such as parents or representatives of the law, who give utterance to its desire. We find characteristics of the big Other in Fanshawe:

Fanshawe stood apart from us, and yet he was the one who held us together... He was there for you, and yet at the same time he was inaccessible. You felt there was a secret core in him that could never be penetrated, a mysterious center of hiddenness. To imitate him was somehow to participate in that mystery, but it was also to understand that you could never really know him [210].

...

I would get so close to Fanshawe, would admire him so intensely, would want so desperately to measure up to him – and then, suddenly, a moment would come when I realized that he was alien to me [212].

These two passages exemplify Fanshawe's Otherness, with his "secret core," his "mysterious center of hiddenness," and his ultimate alienness. Equally significant in this character is the impression he has left as an individual of indelible authority. He was always more capable than everyone else, always knew what the (morally) right thing to do was, and, for the narrator of the tale, always acted as a guiding social principle. These passages, with the condition of being concomitantly close to and at a distance from Fanshawe, also offer an explicit if simplified idea of the extimate quality of the big Other's desire: one imitates and integrates this 'external thing', though even in this integration, there always remains an inaccessible core, an ultimate alienness at an innermost locus.

The following passages exemplify this condition of an 'internalized' abstraction that is at once gone in a real physical sense, but ever-present as an unconscious force:

The fact that I did not once stop thinking about Fanshawe, that he was inside me day and night for all those months, was unknown to me at the time. And if you are not aware of having a thought, is it legitimate to say that you are thinking? I was haunted, perhaps, I was even possessed – but there were no signs of it, no clues to tell me what was happening [242].

...

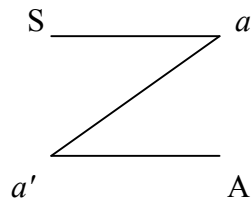
It seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am... Whenever I think of my childhood now, I see Fanshawe. He was the one who was with me, the one who shared my thoughts, the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself [199].

Notable here is not only the way in which Fanshawe resembles a big Other, but also the way he functions like a mirror. As one quickly surmises in *The New York Trilogy*, clear distinctions between the register of the imaginary and that of the symbolic are often



lacking. How can a character be both a representative from the imaginary realm of doubles *and* a representative of the big Other's desire, proper to the symbolic? Lacan's simplified schema L might help to illuminate how this can function without being contradictory.

The simplified schema L is intended to show how the Other functions by 'secretly' manifesting itself at the very core of the subject. It also reconciles the two distinct function-locations of the little other and the big Other:



In the upper left corner, we find the location of the subject (S; the narrator of *The Locked Room's* position), to the right of which is the ego as it is related to an other - that is, the sense of self resulting from identification with the specular image (*a*; the ego-self: Quinn and Blue); at the bottom left corner, we find the location of a little other (*a'*; other-reflection: Stillman Jr., Black), across from which we find the location of the big Other (A; Fanshawe). "[T]he main point of the schema is to demonstrate that the symbolic relation (between the Other and the subject) is always blocked to a certain extent by the imaginary axis (between the ego and the specular image)" (Evans, 169). To put this another way, the subject 'has access to' the big Other through the imaginary medium of others. Thus, even as the ego-other is based on an external specular model that acts as a mirror - a little other - it is through this little other that the big Other 'speaks' its desire, albeit in an inverted or 'interrupted' manner. For example, the point of Blue's incursion into the 'inner sanctum' of Black is to provide Blue with a certain access to himself:

Having penetrated Black's room and stood there alone, having been, so to speak, in the sanctum of Black's solitude, he cannot respond to the darkness of that moment except by

replacing it with a solitude of his own. To enter Black, then, was the equivalent of entering himself, and once inside himself, he can no longer conceive of being anywhere else. But this is precisely where Black is, even though Blue does not know it [191].

It is here that Blue will encounter (albeit unaware) that which is himself and yet more than himself: some intimate and yet foreign force constituting an *extimate* kernel 'within' him. As a force guiding subjectivity, the big Other's desire consists as a condition of extimacy and decenterment.

### **Extimacy and Decenterment: "a letter always arrives at its destination"<sup>12</sup>**

In a sudden "uncustomary act" of recording "certain facts" that "had nothing to do with the Stillman case," Quinn writes in his notebook, quoting Baudelaire: "It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. Or, more bluntly: Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself" (p.109-10). This statement is not unlike the nature of the subject's fundamental displacement in relation to *objet petit a* (as object-cause, or that which sets desire in motion), and the function of lack. The Lacanian notion of lack is central to the function of desire. Dylan Evans points out that "when Lacan introduces the algebraic symbol for the barred Other...lack comes to designate the lack of a signifier in the Other... No matter how many signifiers one adds to the signifying chain, the chain is always incomplete; it always lacks the signifier that could complete it. This 'missing signifier'...is constitutive of the subject" (96). Lacan's method of employing semiotic models (the necessary gap in the chain of signification) to explain subjectivity become entirely evident in Evan's summary of lack. Thus, the way desire functions is closely bound to the way signification functions, with its gaps, perpetual deferral, and perpetual interpretation. As we can see here, desire forms itself around 'something missing'. This 'something' - a lack - is precisely that which is also missing in the big Other: an essential mystery the subject perceives and integrates, taking it 'in' like an oyster does a grain of sand, around which its desire will take shape. Essential to the concept of desire, then, is that there is a double lack: a lack in the big Other which, when the subject identifies with the Other's desire, finally manifests itself as the lack in the subject determining its own

---

<sup>12</sup> Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"

desire. In *The Locked Room*, we can identify just such a structure again in the relationship between the narrator and Fanshawe:

I sensed that I was no longer alone, that I could never be alone in that place. Fanshawe was there, and no matter how hard I tried not to think about him, I couldn't escape... After all these months of trying to find him, I felt as though I was the one who had been found... For if I could convince myself that I was looking for him, then it necessarily followed that he was somewhere else – somewhere beyond me, beyond the limits of my life. But I had been wrong. Fanshawe was exactly where I was, and he had been there since the beginning. From the moment his letter arrived, I had been struggling to imagine him, to see him as he might have been, but my mind always conjured a blank. At best, there was one impoverished image: the door of a locked room. That was the extent of it: Fanshawe alone in that room... This room, I now discovered, was located inside my skull.<sup>13</sup>

Here Fanshawe is portrayed as a representative of this desire or psychological force that is both external and internal: Fanshawe is himself an impenetrable mystery "somewhere beyond me," and at the same time he "was exactly where I was...located inside my skull." The double lack is present here as well: the mystery that is Fanshawe, both 'here' and 'not here', and the image of his location within the narrator as an inaccessible, impenetrable locked room.

We can bind the idea of the desire of the big Other, together with the notion of lack - this intimate but foreign element of the 'unknown' at the center of the subject - back to the concept of the symbolic mandate: like injunctions of the super-ego, the desire of the big Other guides the subject through society by giving form to what society wants from the subject. And what does Fanshawe, this intimate yet inaccessible psychological agency, require of the narrator? Precisely that he fulfill specific symbolic mandates, moving into a place of subjectivity in the social matrix of symbolic fictions: "Make her [Sophie] divorce me, and then marry her as soon as you can. I trust you to do that – and I give you my blessings. The child needs a father, and you're the only one I can count on" (237).

---

<sup>13</sup> 292-3. Within this passage that so closely resembles a Lacanian model of desire, one is also tempted by the line, "[f]rom the moment his letter arrived." As any good Lacanian knows, the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" ends with the line "what the 'purloined letter'...means is that a *letter always arrives* at its destination." The head starts to real when one begins to consider the intertextual connections between this potential reference to Lacan's seminar on Poe's "Purloined Letter," Poe's own works that are less of a silent partner in *The New York Trilogy*, and Baudelaire, who also has a voice in *The New York Trilogy* and who translated Poe's "Purloined Letter" into French to boot.

This mandate, when accepted, unfolds into a new universe for the subject, placing him at an initiatory point of reference: he becomes both husband and father, squarely placed within the socio-symbolic. With this initiation into the symbolic, we don't want to infer that the subject is suddenly at *the center* of a symbolic universe he was previously excluded from. Rather, the subject is always the decentered subject; or, to put it another way, the 'center' is always decentered:

By belonging to Sophie, I began to feel as though I belonged to everyone else as well. *My true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond myself, and if that place was inside me, it was also unlocatable.* This was the tiny hole between self and not-self, and for the first time in my life *I saw this nowhere as the exact centre of the world.*<sup>14</sup>

One can see how Quinn's quoting Baudelaire in *City of Glass* prefigures the narrator's move into subjectivity through his relation to Sophie in *The Locked Room*. The narrative trajectory that unifies the trilogy, then, takes shape through this very move from the isolated individual of the imaginary in the first story, toward the subject of socio-symbolic fictions in the last.

In *The Art of Hunger*, Auster refers to *City of Glass* as a love letter to his wife, Siri Hustvedt, "in the form of a novel. I tried to imagine what would have happened to me if I hadn't met her, and what I came up with was Quinn" (306). Bearing this in mind, what can it tell us about *The Locked Room*? Quinn's family disintegrates and he moves increasingly toward isolation, away from socio-symbolic structures. Answering a call that hails him into the location of husband and father, the narrator of *The Locked Room* does just the opposite. Here, I would return to the claim that if we are to consider *The New York Trilogy* a work of detective fiction, the mystery each tale seeks to uncover is the mystery of the self in its social context. Lacan is particularly useful in reading such a mystery, as his theories of the subject find resonances in Auster's representations of self identity: subjectivity is contingent upon engagement in symbolic fictions that are rooted in language. Thus, if *City of Glass* is a portraiture of the individual without symbolic fictions (Auster without Hustvedt), *The Locked Room* is a portraiture of the subject within them.

---

<sup>14</sup> 232, italics mine.

### Works Cited

- Auster, Paul. *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- . *The New York Trilogy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.
- Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Brunner-Routledge, 2001.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In *The Freud Reader*. Peter Gay (Ed.). U.K.: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989.
- Herzogenrath, Bernd. *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster*. Postmodern Studies 21. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999.
- Jahshan, Paul. "Paul Auster's Specters." *Journal of American Studies*, 37 (2003), 3: 389-405.
- Jakubzik, Heiko. *Paul Auster und die Klassiker der American Renaissance*. Diss. Ruprecht-Karls-Universitaet Heidelberg, 2007. <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/7259/>
- Klepper, Martin. *Pynchon, Auster, DeLillo: Die amerikanische Postmoderne zwischen Spiel und Rekonstruktion*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 1996.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1991.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "William Wilson." In *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. Graham Clarke (ed.). London: Everyman's Library, 1908.